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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VOCABULARY.

AMONG the many murmurs of dissatisfaction that arise today concerning the results of the teaching of English in our secondary schools is a constantly recurring one of the lack of power of young people to use words with any effectiveness. The complaint is urged with growing frequency that the increased effort of the last ten or fifteen years along the line of language work has not produced results commensurate with the time expended, and that our students have only a thin and meager vocabulary with which to express their thoughts. Even in the high-school period there is a lamentable want of interest in exact, forceful expression. Curiosity with reference to word-usage is so rare as practically to be non-existent. There is no effort at experimentation with language, but rather a ready acceptance of the old and familiar, and an apparent desire to say the thing in mind as easily and quickly as possible and be done with it. Even in the widely prevalent and constantly increasing use of slang the same carelessness and indifference to word-values are perceptible, the meaningless, pointless phrase passing muster quite as rapidly as that which from its terse vividness deserves acceptance. If these criticisms are well founded—and there seems to be little room for doubt—they call for serious consideration, for the failure to acquire a fairly large working vocabulary, or, what is more serious still, the failure to desire such a vocabulary, is a graver charge against our teaching of English than appears on the surface. There can be no question that one of the chief aims of education is to develop the power of clear, definite thought. It is the function of language to assist in this process. This being so, there can be no justification for such emphasis as for years has been laid upon language work, unless its results are to show in thought-power. Given any real expansion of thought and expansion of speech will necessarily follow, for so closely connected are language and thought that no separation is possible. The development

of one means the development of the other; a failure in one, a failure in both.

In attempting to get at the root of this lack of success two considerations are of special importance. The first is the symbolic nature of language. This should never be lost sight of. Words as existences, as separate entities, are of no moment in the development of thought; the fact of prime importance is that the word is sign of an idea. It is because words have meaning, because they stand for something, and further because they are the only possible instruments for thinking about the meaning which they symbolize, that the development of a vocabulary is so vital a thing in the development of thought, and that haziness and inaccuracy in the meaning and use of words inevitably mean a like haziness and inaccuracy in thinking. Since this is so, the matter of the acquisition of words becomes a matter of acquisition of meanings. It may seem at first sight unnecessary to lay such emphasis upon this symbolic character of language, as if it were so fundamental a matter that it could not be overlooked, and yet it is to the very neglect of this close interrelation that we owe much of our failure so to teach words as to make them a vital aid in the development of thought. In our earliest effort to assist children in gaining a vocabulary we make much use, and rightly so, of the instinct to imitate. Even in the later stages of word-growth it may still be a very prominent factor, but it brings with it after the first years a danger that we should be more quick to perceive and guard against were this close connection between words and meaning always in our minds. Words may be memorized as parrots memorize them; words may also to a certain extent be used as parrots use them, in combinations correct in form, but empty of meaning. Such word-usage cannot be the result of clear-cut, definite conceptions, nor can symbols so employed be a means of thinking about the ideas for which they stand. Far from aiding in the development of thought, they are rather that which destroys thought by destroying attention to it.

The second consideration calling for attention in our desire to find a sound basis for our work is the language equipment

which the child possesses at the time of entering school, together with some knowledge of the way in which he has acquired his stock in trade. Not until something of this is known can certain vital questions be answered that present themselves to teachers at the very beginning of language training: What shall the nature of the work be? How much clear and accurate verbal knowledge ought to be assumed? Is the emphasis to be laid on the acquirement of new words and meanings, or is it necessary to spend time and effort in making old words more definite, in clarifying old meanings? And how shall we work—shall we enlarge and renovate a child's speech in the way it was formed, or shall we invent new methods of procedure?

Certain general steps in the growth of a vocabulary can easily be traced. Since all acquirement of language in the true sense of the term is an acquirement of meaning, and since meaning is the establishment of a fixed relation between a symbol and an idea, the development of speech is dependent upon association. In the first babblings of an infant, in the child's first imitations of the sounds of words, there is none of this; but so soon as he begins to link together names and objects of sense-perception so closely that the one suggests the other, his acquirement of meaning has begun. For some time his additions to his vocabulary are words symbolizing elementary modes of sense-experience; he is in the perceptual stage, and his field of consciousness is filled with sensory and motor impressions, with perhaps their simplest emotional accompaniments. On the language side of his life his whole effort is given to naming his world. But the rapidly expanding mind of the child is not long content with this simple process. At first he sees objects singly; soon he begins to see them in combination; before we know it relations begin to dawn upon his mind, simple ones first of contiguity, then more complex ones of similarity and contrast; and finally, as he gains power to abstract from an object the characteristics that distinguish it, he slowly becomes conscious of likenesses and differences, not only between objects of sense-perception, but between relations as well. And hand in hand with this growing complexity of thought goes a corresponding growth in

language, without which any steady advance in thought-power would be impossible. New ideas are fitted with appropriate symbols, by means of which the child may fix his attention on them or bring them once more before the mind in ideal representation, that he may proceed to further analyses and syntheses. Now if this were all, if the child progressed only in such orderly fashion as here indicated, acquiring new ideas only as his experience widened, fitting to each new thought a symbol, and testing its appropriateness by his ability to make it serve his ends, storing up the useful and true for future needs, and rejecting the false, the work of teaching language would be much less difficult; but no such beautiful simplicity exists. Nature in decreeing that man should be an imitative animal, endowed him with the power to work out a system of copies for his use. To a certain extent the child may recapitulate in his development that of the race; by means of this copy system he also outstrips it by leaps and bounds. And one of the most important of the models which civilization has furnished for the use of the learning child is the vocabulary he hears about him. He does not wait to gain words as he needs them; he discovers great bodies of them in use about him, as well as numberless interested friends eager to teach him to utter them in his babbling tongue, though unfortunately for his later use of language, less eager to be sure that each word has its appropriate value. With some of these new acquirements he absorbs at once a meaning, or it may be he invents general meanings to fit the general speech about him. As time goes on, by a process of delimitation, the result of testing by experience, he makes more and more particular these vague generalities, until his use of words approximates that of society about him. Now, if it could be certain that at the beginning of the school period this process of clarifying had been thoroughly done, that to each word acquired had been fitted a clear and definite meaning, our line of work would be easy to decide. Can we be sure of this? Do we not know from the amusing mistakes of children how much greater is the memory for verbal sounds than the knowledge of meaning? The failure to recognize this is the cause of much of our failure in the teaching of language. We start

in assuming knowledge that does not exist: we continue to assume that knowledge all along the line. What wonder that by the time the high-school period is reached we are met with hazy, indefinite thought!

So the most important work of the teacher of language is to make sure that each word bears for the child clear and definite significance, and at the same time to increase as rapidly as possible his stock of such definite conceptions. How shall this be done? So far as possible by following the child's own method of development. The order of mental growth is real knowledge before verbal knowledge. A child in his first efforts to gain a vocabulary is in the realm of present experience; so should he be as much as possible in his first school years. The old pedagogical maxim, "things before words," "words through things," had lost none of its weight. Instead of giving to language work the place of chief honor in the curriculum, let it here seem to be subordinated to the enlarging of personal experience; let the child's main interest seem to be the discovery and appropriation to himself of new truths, and let speech grow by natural development out of the desire and the effort to communicate to others his newly attained experience. In the beginning there will be a continuation of the earlier process of naming things, valuable in proportion as the symbols are directly significant because of first-hand experience with the objects for which they stand. The nature work of the lower grades furnishes plentiful material for this training; it also presents a grave danger that has not always been avoided. To begin in the perceptual stage of sense-experience is good; to remain there is a grave error. The whole trend of education should be in the direction of conceptual thinking. Clear perception there must be, but only that the resulting conception may likewise be clear-cut and exact. So along with this process of seeing objects and fitting to each its correspondent sign, must go constant training in the discovery of relations and the finding of appropriate symbols with which to give them expression. This work also should be as much as possible with objects of sense-experience, since only by this means can new words have direct significance. The question

arises in this connection whether it is useless to attempt to describe or explain that which the child has not personally experienced, whether it is impossible by means of conceptions already embodied in language to gain new conceptions. To a certain extent this may be done; under the guidance of the teacher a child may put together certain qualities or characteristics already directly experienced and by an act of synthesis gain an indirect conception, but it is a pale and ghost-like shadow of the idea gained by direct experience, and all such teaching should be with a clear recognition of its limitations.

In connection with this matter of the perception of relations there is suggested a weakness in the thought and expressional life of young people which results from insufficient training in this respect. From the simple mental operation involved in seeing that the rose is different from the lily, but that both are flowers, to the subtle, exquisite similes and metaphors of the poet, may seem a long step, but the thought-process in each is the same. Much of the beauty of poetry comes from the rich suggestiveness of its figures of similarity and difference; much of the lucidity and convincingness of the best prose is due to the power to suggest the same relations. One would be slow to say that by continued practice in the detection of relations of likeness and contrast could be produced the illuminating images of a Shakespeare, a Tennyson, or a Ruskin; but there is no question that by constant practice in seeking these relations, and by continued effort to give them expression, much can be done to develop that power which is too often thought to be the exclusive endowment of the literary artist.

A further consideration needs attention so soon as children begin to read. In order that the printed word may have full significance and meaning, its context in the sentence must be grasped; the relation of each symbol must be seen to the other symbols comprising the sentence and to the sentence as a whole. Much of the inability of young people of today to extract the meaning from the printed page is due to failure here; much of the failure is due to misdirected effort on the part of the teacher. There is no lack of laudable endeavor to give significance to

words; the conscientious, persistent teacher may even achieve a commendable interest on the part of his students in the dictionary, and still the trouble may be untouched. While the child was in the stage of indicative communication, using only isolated words to suggest his meaning, he was not yet in the realm of speech as such; not till predication began did he enter the field of language proper. So with definition. That kind of exercise, unfortunately still too common, which separates a word or phrase from its context and considers it apart from the relations involved, not only does nothing to advance the acquirement of meaning, but destroys gradually any true conception of the inseparable relation of words to thought.

And so we come back once more to that which is at the root of this whole matter—the vital and indivisible connection between thought and words. It is only by constant emphasis upon this relation, that we may in time hope to give to our young people the help that should be derived from the study of language. Once this is clearly grasped, every reading lesson, every object-lesson, every right use of a text-book, every recitation, whatsoever its subject-matter, becomes a lesson in language, in that it should aim to fit definite, accurate meaning to the printed or spoken sign, and to find exact symbols to express the particular ideas under consideration. And not until this close and vital connection between thought and language has become more than a vague pedagogical theory, and teachers will recognize that the matter of acquirement of definite and exact meaning is the concern of everyone who undertakes to teach, no matter what his subject, can we hope to attain that development in the use of language which alone makes possible any considerable development of thought.

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